

# The Individual and Society: The Social Role of Shame

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**Abstract:** The article examines the social and cultural role of shame in Western culture throughout history. Even though shame is a feeling that has a physiological basis, the way in which we experience emotions differs from culture to culture since it is the meaning that we attach to an event that evokes the emotion rather than the event itself. The article analyzes this cultural phenomenon, by looking at, among other things, the foundational religious texts of Western culture. In addition, a reflection on whether there has been a shift in the role of shame as a social guide in the age of social media is presented. The methodology most fitting to examine this cultural construct is the genealogical method, which corroborates the idea that shaming is not an essentially new phenomenon in Western culture, but only a new mode of expressing old patterns.

**Keywords:** shame, emotion, individual, society, genealogy.

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## **1. Introduction**

**I**n the age of the Internet and social media, a change seems to be taking place in our conceptions of intimacy and shame. On the one hand, intimate personal revelations online have become the norm and seem to attest to a certain shamelessness; on the other hand, we see much discussion around the subject of “shaming” as a noxious phenomenon by which an individual is publicly chastened by the “herd” without so much as a debate, a trial or even a justified reason. Online shaming through social media is unbridled, has no moral limits, no fear of law or repercussions, and no restrictions. In light of this, we have to ponder whether there has been a fundamental shift in the role of shame as a social guide, and whether the phenomenon of social shaming, as it appears today, is a new phenomenon or an ancient social mechanism which has undergone only a cosmetic transformation due to the new means of communication – the social medium through which the shaming takes place. In order to do so, we must first understand the social and cultural function of the feeling of shame and then examine its history in Western culture.

Shame is a social mechanism employed in our interactions with others, and thus the externalized expression of shame has an important role to play in how an individual relates to society. Shame is the body’s physiological reaction to dealing with social pressure, though culture and society play a central role in fostering this emotion. Shame appears in early childhood, often in relation to a sense of helplessness (Nussbaum 2004, pp. 183-4). According to Darwin, human emotions have a biological, evolutionary basis (Darwin 1872). However, unlike Darwin who saw shame as a universal emotion independent of culture, Edelman maintains

that it is through an individual's interaction with his or her cultural environment that the appropriate response is selected (Edelman 1992). We agree with him that in regards to the physiological aspect of emotions, we have to differentiate between primary emotions, such as fear, which are instilled in us from birth and interpret our physical state as processed by the amygdala, as opposed to secondary emotions, such as the complementary guilt and shame, which are acquired through learning and are located in the frontal cortex of the brain (Damasio 1995). The physiological function of primary emotions is to sound an alarm in the body in times of crisis before the sensory information has even been processed, unlike secondary emotions whose response time is very different and which involve cognizance and understanding (Gonen 2003).

Emotion is the combination of a mental evaluative process, simple or complex, with systemic responses to that process, which molds the subject's relationship with his or her surroundings (Damasio 1995, 139). The immediate personal and social realm is fraught with uncertainty and is related to our fate. Therefore, we must be able to choose the most successful response essential to our existence. The ways in which we experience emotions differ from culture to culture, and our emotional patterns are significantly influenced by the culture around us. That is to say, it is the significance attributed to an event that evokes the emotion, not the event itself (Ben-Zeev 1996).

Shame is a painful emotion that arises when people feel criticized by others following an act that goes against the accepted norms, or as a response to a sense of failure (Nussbaum 2004, p. 184). Darwin, as stated, saw shame as a universal emotion in recognizing the ubiquitous physical processes accompanying it, such as blushing, confusion, lowering one's

gaze, a drooping head, and slumped shoulders (Darwin 1872). He even went on to add that he had witnessed shame in every place he had visited around the world; however, he never addressed the culturally-influenced mental evaluation that put the physiological reactions related to shame into motion.

Ruth Benedict, on the other hand, puts forth a contrasting theory (Benedict 1959). She maintains that shame is defined as the desecration of cultural or social values, which differ from culture to culture and are not universal. In summarizing Benedict's views on culture, Margaret Mead wrote that Benedict saw culture as akin to "personality writ large" – every culture has a "personality" which resides inside every individual who partakes of this culture (Mead 1975). A middle way between these two opposing standpoints is presented by Martha Nussbaum. In her study of social and cultural interpretations of human emotions, she argues that we must consider emotions as part of the system of thought and ethical choice (Nussbaum 2001). Nussbaum carefully navigates the line between cultural relativism and the raw universalism of biological and cognitive reports pertaining to emotion. Human beings have biological infrastructure, but they also have personalities that are non-genetic structures formed at an early age; they are also influenced by society and culture. The present article seeks to examine the cultural influences on the feeling of shame and in order to do so we shall adopt Nussbaum's approach. This approach maintains that in order to learn about emotion we must turn to texts that have a narrative dimension, and thereby deepen and advance our understanding of ourselves as creatures with a complex temporal history.

We shall first attempt to understand the complex interaction between the individual and society, and examine more closely the role of shame in this relationship. As mentioned above, culture has an important moral role in constructing the concept of the individual and in developing the mechanism of shame as a cultural value and as a deep structure. The methodology most fitting to examine these cultural constructs is the genealogical method, through which we shall analyze the role of shame and the phenomenon of shaming as it appears in the foundations of Western culture. This will allow us to evaluate whether shaming is an essentially new phenomenon, or rather only a new mode of expressing old patterns.

When we undertake to delve into the genealogy of someone or something, we endeavor to tell the story of its past, its origins, and its evolution up to the present moment (Rusinek 2004, p. 410). The basic assumption of the genealogical method is that the fundamental structures of any given culture are to be found deep within its roots. Genealogy may deal with the past, yet its real interest lies in understanding and criticizing present reality. In order to thoroughly understand social shaming in the present we must examine the cultural sources of this phenomenon. The term “genealogy”, in its simplest and most general sense, means the study of generations, of origins. For our purposes, we shall adopt the meaning ascribed to it in the current philosophical discourse – a type of critical methodology (Deleuze 2006, p. 2; Foucault 1977, p. 152). As a philosophical method of inquiry, genealogy is a hermeneutic strategy that documents the history of its subjects. The job of the genealogist, according to Foucault, is to rediscover ourselves by way of a correct handling of the past, through modern self-deconstruction (Foucault 1977). Therefore, accordingly, in this initial genealogy we shall examine shame from interdisciplinary perspectives by conducting an interpretative analysis of religious texts and historical documentation, all while basing ourselves on sociological and psychological research.

## 2. The Individual and Society

**A**lready in the book of *Genesis*, it is written: “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18). Ecclesiastes too, who famously bemoaned “vanity of vanities”, emphasizes the importance of togetherness: “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). Thus, according to the Bible, one of the foundational texts of Western culture, being with others is important on the basic level of physical survival. The social group, the state, the nation, the party, etc. provide security and frameworks of belonging which give us confidence and womb-like protection; on the other hand, they also deprive us of the independence, the singularity and the richness of solitariness (Fromm 2010).

When one thinks tribally, “I” means “we”. The development of the individual as separate from the tribe has to do with the development of self-awareness. Burckhardt maintains that the individual, in the modern sense of the word, was born in the Renaissance. In Italy, in the late Middle Ages, individualism can be seen blossoming among all social classes (Arbel 2002). There are many factors that led to this sudden flourishing, even though signs of the development of personality as a self-sufficient and independent driving force can be spotted in much earlier cultures as well. The Renaissance, however, saw the arrival of individualism in its modern sense as man transitioned from a pre-individualistic state of existence to a state characterized by the full awareness of the self as a

discrete entity (Fromm 2010; Debord 1995, pp. 103-4). That being said, Shanahan finds that both individualism and humanism were renewed rather than invented in the Renaissance, since the Middle Ages was also abound with evidence of personalities being viewed as distinct (Shanahan 1992, pp. 23-4).

With the rise of the modern sense of individualism, man became freer but also lonelier. Despite the establishment of individualism as an important value in Western culture (Huntington 1997), many are still willing to risk their lives, give up their privacy, sacrifice their freedom, their independence, their proper thoughts and personal decisions, all for the sake of belonging to the herd, of escaping loneliness and experiencing the feeling of superficial identity (Fromm 1977). We agree with Raby who argues that man's purpose is not to separate himself from the consciousness of others – for much of his understanding of himself and the world is in relation to this general framework – but rather to try and become an individual with a high level of self, personal and social awareness (Raby 2009). In fact, an individual is a person that views himself as responsible for examining and formulating personally – or socially-publicly – the metaphysical, scientific, political and sociological axioms. This person's individual leanings don't necessarily align themselves with the views accepted by his social group, and he may agree with or go against the political and religious outlooks of his society (Raby 2009). Nevertheless, disobedience and resistance to the group has a history of meeting with punishment and social shaming, in Western culture at least, as we shall demonstrate later on. For centuries, kings, religious authorities, feudal lords, industry magnates and parents have insisted that obedience is a virtue, while disobedience – is a sin (Fromm 2010).

The desire to belong to a social herd also stems from our fear of loneliness, which is perceived as a psychological state of sadness and melancholy due to a lack of company. Weiss (1975) points out that loneliness is not caused by one's state of solitude, but by a life that is lacking fulfilling social relationships. Loneliness is a subjective experience that is not paramount to social isolation; rather it stems from a deficiency in the individual's social connections. Social loneliness is also not necessarily identical to psychological loneliness, and certainly not to creative solitude, or the solitude one seeks in order to examine one's self. A person can be socially isolated and lead a fulfilling and intensely creative mental life. That being said, solitude is good when it is intermittent, when this private domain exists alongside friendship ties, when it does not take over one's life, but is rather a coveted and voluntarily chosen part of it. People who have rich inner lives do not feel lonely in their solitude. Schopenhauer ignores our social need to belong and presents solitude in an entirely positive light: in his eyes, only when man is alone can he be wholly himself. Man is only free when he is alone. Schopenhauer represents the opposite extreme in our view: according to him social man is dull-witted, boorish, and spiritually sterile (Schopenhauer 1969).

Nietzsche too is an avid proponent of extensive solitude. In his view, one must be alone in order to create one's self. To lead a full inner life, one has to retire from the herd into individuality: "Would you go into isolation, my brother? Would you seek the way to yourself?" (Nietzsche 2003, p. 47). But the way to the self is anything but straightforward: "But the worst enemy you can meet will always be yourself; you lie in wait for yourself in caves and forests... You must be willing to burn in your own flame: how could you become new unless you had first become ashes?" (Nietzsche 2003, pp. 48-9).

Unlike Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who disregard the social need to belong in claiming that we must retire from society for the purpose of creative solitude, Spinoza, with whom we agree, argues that the worthy life is one that maintains an equilibrium between the two. As long as man inhabits the solitary realm of the self while belonging in parallel to the realm of the many and remains responsible for his actions, operating out of a full awareness and leading a productive, collaborative and creative discourse with his social group, his solitude will be a tonic to him, without loss of freedom or identity (Harpaz 2013). The very state of awareness frees man from the yoke of his instincts and urges, as well as the influence of outside forces. However, in order to achieve this, man must be aware of his actions and understand the reality in which he operates.

Similar to Spinoza also Russell teaches us that a proper balance must be found between belonging and separateness, or aloneness, rather than a clear-cut decision in favor of either the one or the other (Russell 1996). He writes that human life must contain a wide space which is ruled by what is known as the “herd instinct”, but it also must delimit a narrow space where this instinct is barred from entering. This narrow space belongs to the private domain. It is not only an intellectual domain, but a physical and emotional one as well. Only through the fully led “me-life”, through the hours of aloneness and separateness, through opening up to the rich spheres of existence, through creativity and imagination, through personal pleasures of the body and of the mind – only through these can man glimpse the full scope of his personality upon its many facets, and with it the need to discover and fulfill himself.

As discussed, just as the individual needs the public domain in numerous aspects of his life, he also has need of the private domain for other

aspects. The encounter with the other is also important for one to be able to create himself as an individual. Levinas insists on this important point in the relationship between individual and society, emphasizing the importance of society for the individual's self-development (Levinas 1986). According to him, the self is defined as a subjectivity, as a subject, as an "I", precisely because it is exposed to the other (Levinas 1986). In his conception, it is impossible to create a deep bond of sharing and openness with the other unless we undertake the voyage into the depths of our own souls (Levinas and Melville 1978). The process of revealing one's self to the other is accompanied by discomfort and sometimes even pain. The other is not just another person located outside of the self, but the internalized other who resides in the hidden regions of the I-experience. The interaction created between the "I" and the "other" begins with recognizing the "I" as an individual, as the self. The general mechanism through which the self can develop is reflexive – it is the ability that people have of examining themselves through the eyes of others (Ritzer and Goodman 2003), and this is where shame comes in. The reflexivity, which is essential to the development of the individual, is sometimes accompanied by shame.

Shame is inextricably bound up with the gaze of the other. It is the discomfort created when one feels one's self transformed into an object. According to Sartre, the man who is ashamed is stripped of his humanity because he is denied the independence of being the looking subject rather than the looked-upon object (Sartre 1956, pp. 287-9), an idea which also appears in his famed play *No Exit* (Sartre 1989). The play takes place in a room which, as it turns out, is located in hell. The three characters in the play are led into the room at different points in time. The door is then locked and all three of them expect their torturer to arrive imminently –

however, no one else comes into the room. As their conversation evolves, it turns out that the differences in each of their world views and systems of values make their company insufferable to each other, it becomes hell. This revelation comes from the shame that each of them feels in his turn as he is made into the object that the other two observers. The other, as Sartre posits in the play, becomes a mirror to each of them, reflecting who he is back at him. The individual has no way of knowing who he is without this reflection. The exposure and the unrelenting gaze make this relationship into a hell: “So this is hell. I’d never have believed it” (Sartre 1989, p. 45). Hell is the gaze of the other: “each of us will act as torturer of the two others” (Sartre 1989, p. 21).

In the play, Sartre exposes the central idea of shame as a social mechanism that manifests itself only through interaction with others. Our social connections are important to our individual development and we are very much dependent on the way society sees us. Shame, then, is the fear of being exposed. For a real human connection to be established, we must reveal our real selves, the inner part of ourselves of which we are often ashamed. We are terrified by the thought that there might be something about us which, when seen or discovered by others, will make us unworthy of human bonding.

### **3. The History of Shame and Shaming in the West**

**L**et us now proceed to genealogically examine the social and cultural function of shame in the West, as it is inscribed in the culture’s origins. In the classical world of ancient Greece, shame was

considered an important social guide and was therefore an appreciated emotion. Aristotle divided the attributes into virtues and vices, and listed shame as a virtuous mean (Shkolnikov and Weinrib 1998, pp. 165-7). The virtuous mean is the golden mean; as it is written on the Temple of Apollo: “Nothing too much” (Plato 1956, p. 77). The golden mean, according to Aristotle, is the rule of thumb to follow in most instances in life. Socrates, who unlike Aristotle ignores emotions and the non-rational aspect of the mind, also speaks of shame: “I’m going to keep my head wrapped up while I talk...that I may not look at you and become embarrassed” (Plato 2005, p. 443); “I therefore, because I am ashamed at the thought of this man and am afraid of Love himself, wish to wash out the brine from my ears” (Plato 2005, p. 463). For Socrates, shame is the tension between the individual and society. He covers his face so that his shame does not prevent him from participating in speech-making, and in order to preserve the image of his person in the eyes of his lover.

From classical Greek philosophy, let us now turn to examine the cultural role of shame in some of the other canonical texts, the religious texts of Western culture, the Old and New Testaments. Religion is a clear marker of culture, which reflects its thought systems and cultural values. In both Judaism and Christianity, the Bible is perceived as sacred, as absolute truth, as the product of divine revelation (Hacohen 2006, p. 23). We first learn about the power of shame, specifically as it relates to the gaze of the other, from the book of *Genesis*. The word “ashamed” appears in the story of Adam and Eve even before they’d eaten from the tree of knowledge: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). After they’d eaten from the tree, however, their eyes are open: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made

themselves aprons” (Genesis 3:7). With the opening of their eyes comes the awareness of nakedness, which is followed by the need to cover up and even hide: “and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). They hide from the gaze, which is perceived as threatening, condemning, uncomprehending and unaccepting. The words for “shame” and “genitals” in biblical Hebrew are derived from the same root. Shame is implicit in the revelation of one’s sexuality in the presence of the other; the emergence of awareness following Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge puts an end to the possibility of walking around naked in the Garden of Eden.

In the book of *Genesis* we also encounter the most ancient example of shaming mentioned in the Bible – the “mark of Cain”, which is part of the story of Cain and Abel, the story that recounts the first murder in human history. Abel was a shepherd, whereas Cain worked the earth. Cain made sacrifices to God and brought him an offering made up of the fruits of the earth. Following his brother’s example, Abel offered God his herd’s first-born lambs and their mothers’ milk. God accepted Abel’s offering graciously, however he rejected Cain’s sacrifice. Cain chose to deal with his disappointment and jealousy through violence, and so he murdered his brother (Genesis 4:9-10). He then felt guilt and shame and elected to hide the act of murder from God, thus his sin was twofold. God punished Cain for his sin by cursing the earth which he used to work and condemning him to a life of endless wandering (Genesis 4:11-12).

Cain, realizing that a life of rootless vagabonding will leave him exposed to great danger, turns to God with a complaint that expresses his great fear. He is scared of the animals on one hand, and of the people on

the other, in case they should decide to kill him in return for the atrocious murder he has committed. Therefore, God chooses to brand Cain with a mark that will give him protection and shelter from his enemies and quell the fear in his heart: “And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him” (Genesis 4:15). On the other hand, the mark of Cain carries an important social, educational and moral message: it is forbidden to take the law into one’s own hands, and it is doubly forbidden to seek retribution of the eye-for-an-eye variety. The term “Mark of Cain” has since passed into colloquial use. It has come to denote a negative label, a tag that attests to some moral flaw, analogous in fact to public shaming.

The display of one individual’s deed in public, for the eyes of all to see, has the moral intent of deterring others from committing the same deed: “And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the Lord thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously” (Deuteronomy 17:12-3); “many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord” (Psalms 40:3).

There are frequent instances in which the Biblical text presents shame, in its cultural-religious role, as a component of the relationship between the individual and God, and between the nation of Israel and God. In fact, the absence of shame often denotes a moral failure: “Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down” (Jer-

emiah 6:15). Conversely, shame is a requirement for the act of moral repentance, as described in the dialogue God has with Ephraim: “I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth” (Jeremiah 31:19). A similar use of shame is made by Ezekiel when he is instructed by God to reproach Jerusalem with its “abominations”: “yea, be thou confounded also, and bear thy shame” (Ezekiel 16:52); “Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord God, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel” (Ezekiel 36:32).

Shame also appears as a punishment meted out to those who transgress against God: “Let them be confounded and put to shame that seek after my soul” (Psalms 35:4); “Behold, all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded” (Isaiah 41:11); “That thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God” (Ezekiel 16:63). Therefore, it is not surprising that one would wish to avoid shame: “Let my heart be sound in thy statutes; that I be not ashamed” (Psalms 119:80), and that future salvation contains a promise to no longer experience it: “But Israel shall be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end” (Isaiah 45:17).

The Bible also contains descriptions of the physical manifestations of shame, such as bowing one’s head: “They were ashamed and confounded, and covered their heads” (Jeremiah 14:3). Shame is accompanied by the fear of shame: “Yet they shall fear, and they shall be ashamed together” (Isaiah 44:11), whereas the promise of release from shame is also

a release from fear: “Fear not; for thou shalt not be ashamed: neither be thou confounded; for thou shalt not be put to shame: for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth” (Isaiah 54:4).

In the New Testament, shame appears, on the one hand, in its negative religious-social connotation, as an emotion that comes about from one’s failure to uphold the prescribed values and beliefs, and which one wishes to avoid: “But we have renounced the secret things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully” (2 Corinthians 4:2); “my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed” (Philippians 1:20). On the other hand, believers are encouraged not to feel ashamed even if society may try to shame them: “And whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Romans 9:33); “if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved...For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Romans 10:9-11), even if there is suffering involved: “Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed” (1 Peter 4:16). In fact it is those who oppose and shame Christians who should themselves be ashamed: “Whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ” (1 Peter 3:16); “all his adversaries were ashamed” (Luke 13:17); “and if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed” (2 Thessalonians 3:14); “that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you” (Titus 2:8).

Both shame and shaming then, as attested by the Old and New Testaments, had an important religious-social function. However, reli-

religious establishments also had a significant role to play in interpreting these texts and shaping the cultural uses of shame over the ages. When worldviews are deeply entrenched in the religious experience, which we might assume, based on Jung, they have the hidden power to exert force and orient culture, while constantly changing, and be preserved in the secular experience as similar structures with new forms of expression (Jung 1916). Jung demonstrates this using the example of Catholicism, showing that despite the disappearance of certain Catholic ideologies in the period following the Middle Ages, their vitality was never extinguished and they are still present in the culture. Our modern consciousness, according to Jung, is soaked through with Christianity (Jung 1916, pp. 81-2). A similar claim is put forth by Freud; he too concludes that religion has tremendous power to control mankind's most visceral emotions (Freud 1990). Religion has constructed a comprehensive and ensnaring world view, which has withstood countless major shocks to remain firm and valid to this very day. Therefore, we shall proceed to conduct a genealogical examination of the emotion of shame and its social function in the commentary of the foundational religious texts in Western culture as well.

First, let us examine the place of shame in Jewish religious commentary. The attitude of the Jewish Sages towards shame is divided – on the one hand they said “a bashful one cannot learn” (Pirkei Avot, 2:5) and encouraged the students to be bold, not to be afraid to ask questions that may seem shameful. On the other hand they also said “The brazen—to purgatory; the bashful—to paradise” (Pirkei Avot, 5:20). Thus there is a need for a measure of shame, for when a man is utterly shameless, he may act in detrimental ways without any consideration for others or society as a whole. It is important, however, to note that they likened shaming oth-

ers or humiliating them to murder: “It is more comfortable for a person to cast himself into a fiery furnace than to humiliate another in public to avoid being cast into the furnace” (Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia, 59a); “Rabbi Elazar of Modi’in would say: One who...humiliates his friend in public...although he may possess Torah knowledge and good deeds, he has no share in the World to Come” (Pirkei Avot, 3:11).

The discourse underlying the subject of shame in Judaism also touches upon the subject of confession. During Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), confession of sins does not entail shame. It is vague and general, forgoing the mention of names, times and places. The confession is made in the first person plural, without placing blame on one sinner in particular: “We are blameworthy. We have betrayed our ideals. We have denied the rights of others. We have used empty words” (Klein 2004, p. 403). The supplication for general forgiveness – “we implore thee, Lord our God and God of our ancestors, to forgive all our failings, pardon all our wrong-doings, and grant us atonement” (p. 495) – nevertheless contains a detailed list of sins, divided into categories: “For our sins committed by opening our lips,” “for our sins committed through illicit relationships,” “for our sins committed openly or secretly,” “for our sins committed through deceit and falsehood”, “for our sins committed through neglect of parents and teachers,” “for our sins committed through the desecration of religion” (pp. 497-9). The confession is not individual or personal; it is collective and pronounced out loud in first person plural and therefore does not entail the shame that is needed to feel guilt.

The personal confession, in Judaism, is whispered to one’s self, internally, without public sharing. Thus, there is some controversy over the subject of specifying the sin: “Some decree that the details of the sin must

be given...for the sake of shame...for the sinner must feel ashamed of his sins...while some opine...that there is no need to describe the sin. He can pronounce the sin in alphabetical order, even out loud, for this is not describing the sin in detail, as everyone pronounces it equally" (Zevin 1965, pp. 412-55). However, overall, Jewish confession is not intrinsically accompanied by shame as it is in Christianity.

The question of shame in the context of confession is fundamentally different in Christianity, especially in Catholicism. The sacrament of confession and atonement is supposed to afford constant moral betterment with the purpose of gradually approaching that impeccable obedience to God which characterized man's existence before the original sin. Christian confession, from the thirteenth century onwards, had become a ritual of primary importance in the Christian world, one with long-term psychological and social repercussions. Thirteenth-century theologians were aware of the cleansing power of confession as an act that unburdens the conscience and resolves internal conflicts stemming from the confessor's great shame and sense of guilt. The call for self-examination and the admission of failures was a positive element in itself (even though the sin was in the eyes of God and the moral code was that of austere Catholicism), however widespread misuse of this tool has led to mass anxiety, debilitating shame and excessive guilt (Horowitz 1979).

In the world of the Middle Ages, Catholicism created a cycle of judgment, guilt and punishment. Spiritual existence came to be governed by a pendulum swinging between threat and encouragement, between punishment and forgiveness, all in order to allow believers to get over the main and inescapable obstacle to confession – shame. Initially, Christian confession was not conducted in a private confession booth, but publicly

before the whole congregation, because the element of shame and the act of shaming was an essential part of the ritual (Kleinberg 1995). In the immediate sense, confession and atonement granted the sinner the right to receive communion and take part in the social life of the congregation. But the propaganda efforts that the preachers resorted to in order to encourage confession did not skim on threats of hellfire and brimstone, and thus went a long way to contribute to the air of magic and mystery that became attached to this act (Horowitz 1979). The Church authorities looked on with apprehension as, under the influence of preachers, a growing folklore developed around the practice of confession. This folklore largely did away with the psychological aspect of unburdening one's soul, and emphasized the immediate causal and quasi-mystical connection between speech and redemption – right here, right now.

With time, the Church transformed confession into a recurring private ritual, rather than a public-communal spectacle because the shame of it became too much to bear. However, the insistence on confession went a long way to instill a sense of permanent guilt in the Christian believer. As Thomas Kempis puts it: “No man is worthy of heavenly comfort unless he have diligently exercised himself in holy compunction” (Kempis 1959, p. 42). On this point we agree with Nietzsche who recognized the gravity of the situation: according to him, systems of religion and morality based on feelings of guilt and shame, such as Christianity, are the main reason behind the weakening of man's natural force and thus also the stagnation and atrophy of culture and intellectual progress (Golomb 1987, p. 130).

Nevertheless, shame can also be viewed as an indispensable emotion, in that it nudges the consciousness and evokes regret and self-awakening. Without it, there is no change, growth, forgiveness or turning over

a new leaf. The possibility of biographical rehabilitation, the re-biography so to speak, depends on whether the meta-codes dictating a person's life have a hermetic or a hermeneutic attitude towards the past; whether they allow for a reinterpretation of the personal past (Rotenberg 1997, p. 84). The great problem arises, of course, when an external, authoritative power, such as religious authority, social pressure, parents or even the super-ego overuse and abuse shame. Culture, in many instances, is something that is imposed upon a reluctant majority by a minority that has managed to take over the means of power and coercion (Freud 1994). Personal, internal shame is essential for psychological change, however, when it becomes public and degrading, it has no positive value, for it carries with it no opportunity for rehabilitation, only destruction, fear and ostracism, and has no psychological benefit.

While shame in general can be seen as imperative for change and growth, public shaming is destructive and impossible to rehabilitate – it is the mark of Cain. In many cases, shaming is motivated by dark feelings of vengeance, the desire to humiliate and do injustice. The kind of shaming that is rampant in the social media today consists of putting people on instantaneous public trials which tarnish their reputations in the eye of society without any sense of proportion to the transgression attributed to the accused or any consideration for their positive deeds and qualities. As Sartre writes in *No Exit*, “can one judge a life by a single action?” (Sartre 1982, p. 43).

Institutional and social shaming, as we've inscribed in the religious texts of the West, is perceived as punishment and has an element of deterrence – with the object of preventing this kind of behavior from the individual or within society in general in the future (Sellin 1980). There

are many instances over the course of Western history when, in the interest of deterrence, destructive, public and unbridled social shaming took place in the town square. For example, the 17th century puritans of New England had a particularly cruel system of punishment that included public shaming, as documented in one of the public records from the era: when a carpenter asked for an exorbitant price for a hanging post, he ended up hanging from the very same post that the town authorities had ordered from him (Rotenberg 1994). In 1787, Benjamin Rush, one of the founding fathers of the United States of America, wrote an incisive article demanding that public beatings, pillories and other punishments by humiliation that used to be carried out in the town square for public viewing be banned (Runes 1947). Fifty years later, public punishment ceremonies were banned in every state in the U.S.A., with the exception of Delaware.

The social sanctions of ostracism, shaming and public denunciation were thoroughly described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the most prominent thinkers of the Enlightenment, as well as one of its harshest critics. When he published his books *The Social Contract* and *Emile*, his writings were banned and Rousseau was forced to leave Paris. In *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau talks about the shaming and public scorn he'd experienced, as well as his subsequent loneliness: "All the time when, untroubled in my innocence, I imagined that men felt nothing but benevolence and respect towards me and opened my frank and trusting heart to my friends and brothers, the traitors were silently ensnaring me in traps forged in the depths of hell..Would it not have been better to combat my persecutors with their own weapons, adopting their principles rather than clinging to my own illusions, which I cannot defend against their onslaught?" (Rousseau 1984, pp. 56-8); "I swear to Heaven that if I could

instantly retract the lie which exonerates me and tell the truth which incriminates me without blackening myself still further by this recantation, I would do so with all my heart, but the shame of thus being caught in the act is a further obstacle to honesty and I feel genuine repentance without daring to make amends” (Rousseau 1984, p. 74).

As previously stated, we must distinguish between shame as an emotion vital to the development of a moral conscience and shaming, which is an ancient and reprehensible social act. In most social systems, shaming is triggered by an individual’s disobedience to social norms. Obedience is perceived as the highest of virtues, while disobedience is the worst of sins. The individual feels shame and fear while performing the act of disobedience. At the basis of these emotions, as we’ve seen in the Biblical text as the religious cornerstone of Western culture, lies the Christian education that interprets man’s disobedience to God as the single act that corrupted him and his seed so fundamentally that he could only be saved by divine grace (Fromm 2010).

#### **4. Shame and Shaming in the Digital Age**

**I**n our current era, with social networks continuing to expand, giving every individual access to a pulpit from which he can express his opinions and determine the fate of a person or a company for better or for worse, the phenomenon of shaming has returned to center stage, this time in a more widespread, viral and global fashion than ever before. This phenomenon, as the genealogy shows, is nothing new. Society necessitates shame as a personal emotion based on free will and morality; how-

ever it is a great shame when society begins to shame publicly, ruthlessly and violently, in the absence of human respect and compassion, just as the fanatical preachers did in the thirteenth century Church. These Christian extremists did so in the name of God, and thereby, at least according to Nietzsche, shamed God by their actions (Nietzsche 1974).

There is no denying Nietzsche's conclusion that since, as he put it, "God is dead", our responsibility as a society is even greater. The idea of God's death, "Gott ist tot", first appears in *The Gay Science*, as spoken by the mad man: "Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours. ran to the market place. and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!" -As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one... The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him-you and I. All of us are his murderers... What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? ... Do we not feel the breath of empty space?" (Nietzsche 1974, p. 181).

The death of God, according to Nietzsche, is not simply a shift in the scientific worldview; it is an event of dire ethical implications. He does not speak, of course, of the objective existence of God in physical reality, but of God as the foundation of morality in the soul of mankind. The death of God in the modern era, for Nietzsche, has left man without morals to guide him. This could lead to nihilism (Nietzsche 1974, p. 287), a problem that Nietzsche tried to resolve by seeking out new, deeper values than those of Christianity, which man could believe in and live by.

Killing God is described by Nietzsche as a “grand act”. Now that the religious system of morals has been lifted, the door is open to create new theories of morality that are independent of religion. Nietzsche believes that man must overcome himself. Man creates morality rather than the herd with its social norms. By his will to power, man will distance himself from social morality and rebel against it. Man must free himself from the conventions and ideals of his era, and examine the world independently, without illusion. The valueless and unbridled social herd is dangerous, as Nietzsche takes pains to describe and to warn: “Life is a fountain of delight, but where the rabble also drinks, all wells are poisoned” (Nietzsche 2003, p. 72).

A little earlier in the 19th century, John Stuart Mill also warns us against modern herd mentality and the danger of losing one’s unique identity. Mill warns us that if we think we have done a great thing in making ourselves similar to one another, we forget that it is the differences between one man and the next that attract our attention, that makes one curious regarding the other’s flaws or his preferences, or the possibility of combining the various advantages of the two to create together something better than each could be separately (Mill 1871).

Following, among other things, the blurring of the traditional lines between the public and the private spheres, which began in the course of the 20th century, the individual became increasingly preoccupied with his unique emotional world, mainly through various techniques of exposing the “self” and his relationships to others (Illouz 2008). If the subject is not defined as essentially different than the object, i.e. the other, or if he is not separate from him in a demarcated way, then his internal self will swallow the “outside”, the object, into itself. This way, the uniqueness of

the subject is abolished and the limits between the subject and the object, between the “I” and the “other”, are blurred. Such a state also transforms the definitions of intimacy and the place of shame. If shame stems from the fear of being exposed, as Sartre describes it in “No Exit”, then the blurring of the boundaries between the “I” and the “other”, also inherently disrupts the functioning of shame as a social mechanism (Sartre 1989).

Taylor gives a description of the state of things in today’s world in what we perceive to be accurate terms. In his book *The Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor presents his apprehensions of the dark side of individualism in the “me generation” and goes so far as to call it “malaise”. This same preoccupation with the “me”, according to Taylor, flattens and narrows the scope of our lives, voids them of meaning and makes the individual more apathetic towards the other and society as a whole (Taylor 1991). This kind of individual is not interested in the other. However, the “other”, by the very fact of his existence, disturbs the peace of mind of the “I”. The “other” is a constant provocation that forces an awareness of the other’s “otherness” in the equation.

The new town square and the sharing that takes place nowadays on social media must be understood as part of the overall conception of the Internet as a democratic, open and free space that enables non-hierarchical communication between the individual and society. The absolute or relative anonymity offered by the Internet, as well as the control and filtering of the ways we express ourselves in cyberspace has allegedly opened the gates to one and all in an ideally democratic fashion. On the one hand, some see this new society with its social connectivity as one that has reached a new evolutionary stage, and claim that the Internet enables us to express the altruistic aspects of our natures, as well as collaborate

better with likeminded individuals (Christakis and Fowler 2009). We, however, tend to side with others, such as Graham and Dutton, who see the current digital culture as one that encourages “clicktivism”, whereby people pay lips service to a project or a cause by clicking alone and not through real collaborative partnership (Graham and Dutton, 2014). The same goes for instances of public shaming – at times the act of shaming involves a simple click with no attention paid to the ethical repercussions of one’s actions.

In today’s world, we are caught in a kind of digital vertigo in which we lose our bearings in regards to what is appropriate or inappropriate to share, what is private and what is public, and no less importantly – what is an acceptable response to the “other” and what is not. In many ways we have regressed to the herd mentality and the herd instinct. As Kimchi puts it, online social media users tend to believe that one can fully know a person based on a narrowed down list of their basic qualities, and equally judge them based on superficial information alone, including giving consent, or at least not objecting to shaming (Kimchi 2010). As time goes on, humanity finds itself in a new social state known as “alone together”. This is a social illusion which gives the individual the impression of being connected to society, whereas in fact the connection in question is superficial and impersonal, as opposed to real, intimate, interpersonal discourse (Turkle 2011).

This inherent change has had a dramatic effect on the interpersonal and social relationships between people, causing us to move further and further away from face to face discussions and focus more and more on social ties based on digital communication. In this regard, we tend to agree with Bauman, who claims that the appearance of virtual closeness

has rendered human contact to more frequent, more superficial, more intense and briefer (Bauman 2003). The phenomenon of shaming that we see on social media is the result of a herd dictatorship that tolerates no discussion, thorough deliberation or reasonable resolution. The herd has the ability to influence us all for the worse, as Seneca described over two thousand years ago: “You ask me to say what you should consider it particularly important to avoid. My answer is this: a mass crowd. It is something to which you cannot entrust yourself yet without risk. I at any rate...never come back home with quite the same moral character I went out with; something or other becomes unsettled where I had achieved internal peace, some ... of the things I had put to flight reappears on the scene” (Seneca 1969, p. 41); “avoid,” I cry, “whatever is approved of by the mob, and things that are the gift of chance. Whenever circumstance brings some welcome thing your way, stop in suspicion and alarm...Anyone among you who wishes to lead a secure life will do his very best to steer well wide of these baited bounties” (Seneca 1969, p. 45).

## 5. Epilogue

**I**n the present genealogical study of shame, we have tried to show that shame has had an important role in the individual’s relationship to society throughout the cultural history of the West. Shame has been a social and moral guide in regards to what is allowed and what was forbidden at any given period, arising in the individual out of self-judgment or conversely as a result of social-institutional judgment. The Catholic institution in particular has had a hand in the deep assimilation of shame in its association with Christian guilt. We have also seen that this cultur-

ally-dependent emotion has undergone many changes throughout the ages, especially in the uses of shaming made by the people who made the rules at any given period; there have been times throughout history when shaming has gone too far, becoming extreme and reckless.

Shame is an emotion that arises when we know the rules, when we've learned and internalized them thoughtfully, yet we go against them all the same. But what happens when the rules are not agreed upon, are not familiar or clear to us, and we do not know to give them thought? These are the situations in which the "herd" determines the rules of behavior in a wild, haphazard fashion, similar to the hypothetical situation that Nietzsche worried would arise in the period after the "killing of God" (Nietzsche 1974). Nietzsche was apprehensive not because he desired the continuation of the rule of the Church, of which he was a very harsh critic, but because he was afraid of the "herd" and that the "death of God" could lead to nihilism. Nietzsche suggested that we seek new values, deeper than the values of Christianity, that we could live by.

In the digital sphere – the new, democratic and open town square – are the rules of social morality always clear and familiar to us? Do we possess, as Socrates believed, an inner morality that denies the possibility of our doing evil out of will, awareness, or intention? In his own words: "No one desires what is evil," (Plato 1956, p. 125). I believe that most people do not wish to perpetrate deliberate injustice; however, nowadays, in the age of "clicktivism" and social media, we act more quickly than ever and do not devote enough attention or thought to the 'other' and to the rules, especially because the "other" is virtual for us. This has led to a real disruption of the sense of shame as a social guide. We do not see our shamed friend and we do not see ourselves as shaming. We participate

more easily in the act of shaming in the privacy of the computer screen. Shame as a whole is diminished because virtual proximity eliminates the stress of non-virtual contact (Bauman 2003).

Our moral concepts are formed and applied first and foremost within the context of personal relationships, out of emotional involvement and our subjective tendencies of taking an interest in others, identification, and empathy. Friendships are a very rich moral framework from which we derive our ability to act as moral beings in other, less personal relationships (Benziman 2004). We cannot attain a deep understanding of the social morality in relationships without trying to enter the shoes of the other, which is possible only through personal relationships. In the era of social networking, our relationships lack a measure of depth. On the web, we often isolate a person's singular point of praise in the professional or functional realm, which has no bearing on the moral interactions the person has with others. Conversely, the online community can criticize someone over a singular point of failure and in this case too, our moral judgment will not stem from a deep and comprehensive observation of that person.

Social networks provide a platform where one can publish personal information and receive updates about the personal lives of others. Such unrestricted sharing of personal information blurs the lines between what is public and what is private (Bazarova 2012). This does not necessarily mean that social networks lower our levels of self-awareness; however, we can claim that social media has brought about unexpected transformations to our social compass, to our perception of our own individuality, and accordingly, to the feeling of shame whose function as a social guide has been disrupted.

Let us conclude by mentioning an interesting point raised by the cultural anthropologist Richard Schweder, who claims that shame has not gone away; rather, it has been overpowered by our rising anxiety (Schweder 2003). In his view, capitalist culture treats displays of shame as a weakness, and it is possible that because of the likenesses between the physiological mechanisms of anxiety and shame, we see a drastic rise in the percentage of the population suffering from anxiety disorders. Insufficient research has been done on the subject thus far, but it is possible that the shame of displaying shame is another cultural phenomenon that deserves our attention.

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